34th Legislature of the Virgin Islands
Committee on Youth, Sports, Parks, and Recreation
The Honorable Samuel Carrion, Chairman

Testimony on the status of operations in
the Division of Sports and Athletics (DSA)

Racquel Berry-Benjamin
Commissioner of Education
March 24, 2021
Good Day, Honorable Senator Samuel Carriòn, Chairman of the Committee on Youth, Sports, Parks, and Recreation, other Committee Members, other Senators present and fellow Virgin Islanders. I am Victor Somme III, Assistant Commissioner of Education, appearing before you today on behalf of the Honorable Racquel Berry-Benjamin, Commissioner of Education, to provide testimony on the status of operations of the Division of Sports and Athletics (herein after referred to as the “DSA”). Present with me today are:

- Kennard “Kirby” Callendar, Director – Division of Sports & Athletics
- Bernalyn Tomeau, Program Assistant, St. Thomas-St. John District
- Marisha Butcher, Program Assistant, St. Croix District

The V.I. Department of Education (VIDE) is in the midst of transforming—from it physical structures to its organizational structure; from its policies to its programs. Consequently, the Division of Sports and Athletics is also transforming, with a focus on strengthening existing programs and implementing new ones to increase educational opportunities for student-athletes. To accomplish the aforementioned, the DSA has adopted the following as part of its strategy to advance sports programs and services at the VIDE:

- Integrating technology into its programs
- Increase partnerships
- Diversify educational and training opportunities for students and coaches

Since the onboarding of Director Kennard Callendar in November of 2019, the Division of Sports & Athletics has begun its transformational work. As it relates to personnel, there are now two program managers to oversee and manage athletic programs in both districts—with other talents expected to onboard and support the Division’s programs and services.
As it relates to programs, with limited opportunities to interact physically due to COVID-19, our student-athletes have not been able to participate in any organized sporting activity, except for the “Combine in a Bubble”. During the peak of COVID in our territory, the Division has used its time to transition its office to remote operations, strengthen existing and develop new partnerships, and designing new programs to benefit our student-athletes—programs that promise to give student-athletes the necessary tools to prepare them for the next level of their educational career as student-athletes in post-secondary educational institutions. However, in light of the fact that student-athletes are unable to get adequate practice, training and game time, the Division worked to organize its Honoring a Legend Series. Similar to the Bubble Combine executed with the Department of Sports, Parks and Recreation (DSP&R), students will get an opportunity to engage in athletic competition abiding by the health and safety rules of COVID. This initiative is made up of tournaments in softball/baseball, football, basketball, track & field, volleyball and soccer. The first sport of the series is softball/baseball in honor of Mr. Eugene “Genix” Thomas, an avid baseball coach for the past 50 years throughout the territory. Safety preparations are in place to execute this tournament at the end of April, 2021. Teams have started practicing in their respective districts and games will be played at the D.C. Canegata Ballpark on St. Croix. At the appropriate time, the Department will announce the launch date of the other sports in the Honoring a Legend Series.

INTEGRATION OF TECHNOLOGY

To support student-athletes at the VIDE, the Division of Sports & Athletics utilizes Cybersports, a sophisticated software used to collect statistics for basketball, baseball, softball, football, and soccer. It allows for the recording of game statistics for the purpose of analysis by team personnel, building of individual portfolios, or creating legacy systems. Cybersports’ software allows highly skilled individuals
to record all statistics during the course of a game with the added benefit of the game stats being available immediately. This is not a new phenomenon; however, it is new to the operations of DSA at the V.I. Department of Education. It is a tool we are excited to be able to provide for the benefit of our student-athletes. Currently, the VIDE has a subscription for three (3) different sports, including baseball, basketball, and football; softball and soccer will be added in the near future.

Additionally, to further integrate technology into student-athletes’ programs, the DSA is, at this time, evaluating performance analysis tools in which to invest for our sports teams and athletes, one that:

- Enable coaches and athletes to review game footage and improve team play
- Record and upload video in real time
- Allows for the storing of data on a secured cloud-based platform
- Allows individual student athletes the ability to create a portfolio
- Provides game statistics to allow for additional analysis

INCREASE PARTNERSHIPS

It is the belief of the Department of Education that students perform strong when the support systems around them are strong. Holding true to this belief, the Department of Education has committed to strengthening existing partnerships and building new ones. This is with the full awareness and understanding that transforming our public education system cannot happen in isolation and requires the support of the entire community.

Department of Health

The Division of Sports and Athletics has prioritized the Department of Health (DOH) as a partner, as the health and safety of our students is top priority at the VIDE. In light of the coronavirus pandemic,
partnership with DOH has expanded beyond emergency professionals (EMTs) at our games to include COVID-related guidance to keep students safe during sporting activities.

**Department of Sports, Parks and Recreation**

Similar to the Department of Health, the VIDE has a long-standing relationship with the Department of Sports, Parks and Recreation (DSP&R), which has been phenomenal over the years. Evidence of this was the successful execution of the “Student-Athlete Combine in a Bubble” in November 2020. This enriching activity for Virgin Islands’ student-athletes was designed to provide college-bound sports students in grades 11 and 12 the opportunity to elevate their athletic skills and abilities to their highest levels, despite the current COVID-19 environment. The students, along with coaches, and select VIDE and DSP&R staff chaperones, were contained in an isolation zone, sequestered at either campus of UVI, to preserve the health and safety of participants. Student-athletes participated in male and female (mixed/co-ed) volleyball, boys’ baseball, girls’ softball, boys’ basketball, and girls’ basketball. The activity was at no cost to parents/guardians. The Division of Sports and Athletics communicates regularly with DSP&R and will continue dialogue around the planning of sports leagues for elementary, junior high and senior high schools for the 2021-2022 school year.

**St. Croix and St. Thomas-St. John Interscholastic Athletic Associations**

Partnerships at the DSA extends to private for-profit and non-profit organizations. The Division collaborates with and supports the work of the St. Croix and St. Thomas-St. John Interscholastic Athletic Associations (IAA). The leadership of DSA has met with the IAA throughout the pandemic to discuss the logistics and plans to execute sports games in light of COVID-19. The next meeting with the IAA will include both school districts and is tentatively scheduled during the week of March 29th. We are optimistic about this possibility, as more residents will be vaccinated by the 2021-2022 school year.
Athlete Foundry, Inc.

As the VIDE constantly looks for innovative tools and forward-thinking strategies to support parents and give our student-athletes every possible advantage to succeed, the Division of Sports and Athletics partnered with Athlete Foundry, Inc (AFI), an educational technology company that has built a powerful online student-athlete platform to help 6th through 12th grade student-athletes increase their odds to become a collegiate athlete, increase their college financial assistance potential, and help prepare for life after sports. This is a holistic on-and-off the field approach that gives the parent full command of his or her student-athlete journey. AFI is a fully online, year-round talent, development and journey platform for middle, junior high, and high school student-athletes and their parents. The platform is an athletic and academic management tool for families to support the student-athlete during their journey toward becoming a college or university student. Items such as report cards, GPA, SAT/ACT scores, schedules, statistics, workout drills, health issues, and human-interest issues can all be stored on this platform. The platform allows for families to upload videos and other files they may want to share with coaches, counselors, recruiters or other individuals on the platform. This product retails for $10.00/month for 6th – 9th graders, and $20.00/month for 10th – 12th graders. Because of the partnership the VIDE has entered in with AFI, Virgin Islands’ families have access to this platform at no cost. Students and families will be learning more about this program now that the Memorandum of Understanding between VIDE and AFI is completed.
DIVERSIFY EDUCATION & TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES FOR STUDENTS & COACHES

Coaches’ Certification Program (CCP1)

To ensure the highest quality of instruction and training to our student-athletes, the DSA previously created the Coaches’ Certification Program (CCP1). Coaches are required to pass an online certification exam administered by the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS). Coaches must qualify on a variety of courses, to include Fundamentals of Coaching, First Aid, and Courses on Concussion.

Coach the Coaches Program (CCP2)

Another program in development for athletic coaches at the VIDE is the Coach the Coaches Program (CCP2). The purpose of the program is to ensure the next generation of coaches are equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to coach the next generation of student-athletes. The DSA expects coaches to teach up-and-coming coaches the fundamentals and advanced principles of coaching.

Students as Game Officials (SAGO)

The DSA is expanding its programs for students. There are many students who choose to not participate in sports as players, but still love sports. To provide every child the opportunity to fulfill their dreams and utilize their talents, the DSA has designed the “Students as Game Officials” (SAGO) program. Students that participate in this program do not have a desire to be on the court or field. Rather, they may have a desire for a career as a sports agent, physical therapist, manager, statistician, videographer, referee, umpire, and sports recruiter, to name a few.
CLOSING

In closing, the Division of Sports and Athletics is pleased to have been able to partner with sister agencies to afford our student-athletes game time in a bubble as our territory continues to respond to COVID-19. As previously mentioned, the VIDE’s intent is to provide another opportunity for our athletes before the end of the 2020-2021 school year. If this is unable to be actualized now, we are certain we can afford our students this opportunity during the summer and/or during the 2021-2022 school year, given that all is well from a health perspective.

It is a new day for education worldwide. The COVID-19 pandemic has altered the way we teach and execute student programs. However, the VIDE’s Division of Sports and Athletics is up to the challenge and will continue to find innovative ways to provide student-athletes opportunities to improve their academic and athletic abilities, which, in turn, will translate to success in post-secondary education and in life. Thank you for the opportunity to share this information with you and the public. We are prepared to answer any questions you might have.